

Media salad

by Chuck Kleinhans

Little books

Aufderheide, Patricia. *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2007. \$9.95 US.

A new addition to Oxford's series of authoritative brief surveys, Pat Aufderheide's book provides an efficient overview of documentary film. Given the notable changes in the field since the "social documentary" tradition dominated the subject thirty years ago, the book manages to respect tradition while flagging the newer developments over the past two decades. In addition to the basic history, Aufderheide deals efficiently with perennial questions such as propaganda, ethics, ethnography, and accomplishes a nice concise survey of scholarship. This is just the right supplementary book for a class that deals with some forms of documentary and needs a quick survey. Aufderheide started and runs the Center for Social Media at American University which pioneers information and advocacy for better documentaries:

<http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/>

[Full disclosure: I've known Aufderheide professionally for 30 some years]

Some of the other titles in the Very Short Introduction series that I've liked include: Julian Stallabrass, *Contemporary Art*; Jonathan Culler, *Barthes*; Catherine Belsey, *Poststructuralism*; and Cynthia Freeland, *Art Theory*.

Surveying the field

The online Australian media journal *Screening the Past* celebrated their tenth anniversary with a "survey of the field" of notable work from the past ten years of media studies. The 59 submissions (ranging from Dudley Andrew to Paul Willemen, Laleen Jayamanne to Janet Wasko—and including this writer) provide an interesting overview from a variety of specialties and interests. An often provocative state of the art overview; and a great start for your own reading list.

http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthe_past/22/field-survey.html

Abu Ghraib in art history perspective

A professor of art history at Northwestern, Stephen Eisenman, writes a short, condensed book on the Abu Ghraib which illuminates some of the disturbing power of the images. But he is also concerned with the fact that they are absorbed into the dominant ideology:

“What if the US public and the amateur photographers at Abu Ghraib share a kind of moral blindness—let us call it the ‘Abu Ghraib effect’—that allows them to ignore, or even to justify, however partially or provisionally, the facts of degradation and brutality manifest in the pictures?” (9)

He points at the persistence of a “pathos formula” of passionate suffering in Western classical art ranging from ancient Greece and imperial Rome to work by Raphael, Michelangelo, and Bernini: “the motif of tortured people and tormented animals who appear to sanction their own abuse...” (16) Thus the Abu Ghraib torture photos serve to affirm that the military victors are omnipotent and the prisoners are abject and inhuman which in turn justifies the power relation, the violence exacted on the defenseless.

Eisenman also points to a counter-tradition which resists the formula in which victims welcome their own torture and death. This direction represented by Hogarth, the anti-slavery movement, David’s *Death of Marat*, Goya, Courbet, Manet, and some modern artists works to show the inhumanity of torture and military murder. “*Guernica* is a work of art whose creator has suspended the oppressive, classical equation of beauty, order and power.” (91) But he also warns that the rise of imperialism and totalitarian regimes in 20C re-invigorated the pathos formula: including mass culture (referring to the requisite torture scenes in James Bond movies and the TV series 24). For Eisenman, the elaborate staging of scenes and the photos of them at Abu Ghraib (sanctioned by higher authority)

“was not to obtain information from enemy combatants, or even to inflict punishment; it was to shame prisoners and to gratify ...the feelings of national and racial superiority of the soldiers and civilians at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, and to uphold the moral and political necessity of the American military venture in the face of worldwide opposition and condemnation.” (98)

While the book clearly argues Eisenman’s central thesis, its extreme brevity produces problems for deeper analysis. He takes exception to thinkers who initially linked the photos to pornography (they are not intended to be erotic, he replies) and lynching photos (obscures the purpose of the prison photos and their historical roots). But he sidesteps the nature of the photos as always intentionally showing (a) the prisoners’ abject shame and (b) the military’s theatricalization of their power, and also revealing (c) their additional and unavoidable documentation of a crime to outside judges. The author could

have usefully extended his analysis by considering the considerable critical literature produced by feminists on images of rape and rape threat (e.g., Julia Lesage's essay on rape threat in cinema:

<http://www.uoregon.edu/~jlesage/Juliafolder/RAPETHREAT.HTML>).

The mixture of power and sexuality has been extensively analyzed by feminists discussing rape and clearly pertains to the prison photos.

Additionally there's a well established discussion of the history of war photography which vastly broadens the issues. Obviously, depending on who—which side—is viewing them, civilian casualties can be interpreted as regrettable “collateral damage” or “brutality”; battlefield deaths can be read as “heroic sacrifice” or “wasted losses.” And the larger role of media gatekeeping pertains. We know well that images of Iraqi civilian suffering were kept out of the media in the years preceeding the second Gulf war, just as horrifying battlefield deaths were erased from the visual record of the first Gulf war.

And the topic begs for elaboration. What was the use and function of WW2 atrocity photos such as the Japanese assault on Nanking civilians. Did the Nazis take photographs in the concentration camps? (Perhaps not, we remember the documentary images of the camps at liberation; what would have been the point of images earlier?). What of the images of Mussolini's body, or collaborators with the losing side at the end of the war? And the famous Vietnam image of a street execution, or self-immolating Buddhist monks, or napalm victims fleeing US attacks?

The Abu Ghraib images have at least a double valance. While Eisenman understandably regrets that they were for the most part ideologically absorbed in the US, he neglects that they have been read precisely opposite in the rest of the world, particularly the Muslim world. While they appeared after Eisenman finished his book, analytic films such as *Taxi to the Dark Side* and *Standard Operating Procedure* recontextualize the photos in the political direction he seeks.

Eisenman also plays down one of the explicit purposes of the photos, which was direct humiliation of prisoners whose faces were visible and thus identifiable. They were told that the photos would be shown in their home locales and thus they would never be able to return with any personal or familial dignity. The psychological effect intended to convince the prisoners they had no future and thus should confess and collaborate.

Eisenman's more basic argument seems to be, from his brief “afterward,” a quarrel with the dominant narratives of Western art history, particularly development, progress, and the idolization of Europe. But along the way, he falls into thoughtless editorializing that reveals his own elitism. Cleverly, he labels the prison guards “Right-wing Deleuzians...desiring—machines stymied in familial, social and economic spheres at home, but let loose in Iraq.” (109)

“[Lynndie] England, a young woman from rural Cumberland, West Virginia, enlists in the Army Reserves in order to quit her job at a

chicken processing-plant in Moorhead, a factory singled out by PETA (and filmed) because of its particular cruelty to animals. Sent to Iraq in 2003, she finds there an outlet for her repressed desires: she learns to torture and kill, and pairs up with Grener [the ringleader and instigator of the photos].” (109-10)

How precisely does Eisenman know England’s “repressed desires”? One could, based on the Wikipedia entry for England (which seems like the apparent source for Eisenman’s speculation), also note that she joined the Reserves to get money for college, and that given the charges she faced and her defense and interviews she gave before and after her court martial, that she was directed by others, particularly her boyfriend Grener, to appear in the pictures, and that she was reluctant, but “didn’t want to lose him.” That’s a somewhat different motivation, than Eisenman’s rearticulation of Adorno’s Authoritarian Personality, one quite well thought through by feminists. *The Abu Gharib Effect* makes an interesting start on analysis of the prison photos, but there’s much more to be said.

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